

The bankruptcy of Lutte ouvrière's European election campaign

By Alex Lantier
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France's Workers Struggle (LO) and New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) have mounted a joint campaign for Sunday's European elections. This campaign—disturbed by the “yellow vest” movement against French President Emmanuel Macron and an international strike wave erupting against the trade unions, and silent on the growing danger of imperialist war against Iran—took on the appearance of a rout.

The situation has been transformed since 2002, when LO and the NPA (then called the Revolutionary Communist League, LCR) together obtained 10 percent of the vote. Now, even though social anger and class tensions are at far more explosive levels, LO expects to receive only 1 percent of the vote. The NPA for its part stated it “does not have the financial means to present a list in the European elections.” The two parties failed to reach agreement on a common program in the European elections, but the NPA supported LO anyway.

This highlights the significance of the International Committee of the Fourth International's (ICFI) struggle to build its French section, the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES), against the bankrupt parties of the post-1968 petty bourgeoisie. The union bureaucrats and academics who lead LO and the NPA still advance a few phrases about wage increases amid promotion of the reactionary feminist #MeToo movement. But they cannot hide their hostility to independent struggles like those of the “yellow vests,” who emerged outside of and against the unions' talks with business groups.

LO's April 8 editorial proclaims: “To preserve our conditions of existence, we must increase wages, pensions, and social subsidies, and index them on price increases. Against unemployment, we must outlaw sackings and create jobs by dividing the available work among ourselves, without loss of pay. ... Powerful collective struggles of the world of labour will be needed to modify the existing power relations and impose the demands of the workers' camp. But in these elections, we can at least affirm this by voting for the Lutte ouvrière list led by Nathalie Arthaud and Jean-Pierre Mercier.”

These calls issued by parties controlled by the unions to workers to mobilise in struggle are shot through with bad faith. First of all, they leave out all the international issues facing a struggle of the working class. These include not only the danger of war over Iran, or caused by the militarisation of the

European Union (EU), but also those tied to the eruption of workers' struggles worldwide—of US teachers, Sri Lankan plantation workers, the Portuguese public sector, or Polish teachers—which must be unified in an international struggle against nationally-based union bureaucracies.

Above all, when a powerful collective struggle involving workers and poorer sections of the middle class developed in France against Macron—that is, the “yellow vest” movement—LO, the NPA and the union bureaucracies roundly denounced it. The NPA called the “yellow vests” a “far right mob” and even “the most ferocious opponents of the workers movement.” At the same time, the union bureaucracies where LO and the NPA have their base, strangled strikes called in solidarity with the “yellow vests” by truckers and port workers.

As for Mercier, he is a union official who led the 2013 shutdown of the PSA auto plant at Aulnay, organising a small, purely symbolic strike in the factory without mobilising any broader support from other workplaces against the attack on workers at Aulnay. Isolated and abandoned by Aulnay workers who had no confidence in it, Mercier's strike rapidly fell apart.

During the European campaign, the feminist and business teacher Arthaud sternly lectured and denounced the “yellow vests” yet again. On May 9, at a meeting in Dijon, she said: “I will never be a ‘yellow vest,’ I am a communist revolutionary. I want to overthrow the bourgeoisie, and that goes well beyond the demands of the ‘yellow vests.’ The ‘yellow vests’ are letting themselves get fooled by small concessions like tax cuts. We went to talk to the ‘yellow vests.’ We told them that if they're just shouting ‘Macron, resign,’ that serves no purpose at all.”

Arthaud's claim to be a “communist revolutionary” standing to the left of the “yellow vest” movement and seeking to overthrow capitalism, is a political fraud. LO is a tool of sections of the union bureaucracies and of political movements close to social democracy that emerged from the post-1968 student movement. Its leaders are conscious that they are bought by the bourgeoisie and hostile to any independent struggle like the “yellow vests.”

During the mass protests against the reactionary French labour law in 2016, the WSWS interviewed former LO presidential candidate and long-time spokeswoman Arlette

Laguiller. The WSWS journalists asked her what she thought of the fact that the French union bureaucracy, in which LO works, receive 95 percent of their budgets from businesses or the state.

“Clearly it would be healthier if the parties, the trade unions, everyone was financed by members’ dues, that is true, too. But ... there you go,” she replied, shrugging her shoulders. Asked why there was mounting conflict between workers and the union bureaucracy, she replied: “I think a lot of struggles were betrayed. There are many workers who harbour resentment about struggles that they carried out in which finally the trade unions forced them back to work before they had won a victory.”

A class gulf separates these petty-bourgeois parties from the workers whose struggles they betray. The NPA is the product of the rallying of student leaders of the 1968 student movement like Alain Krivine or Daniel Bensaid to the Pabloite movement that had broken with the ICFI in 1953. The Pabloites advanced a false, anti-Trotskyist perspective that Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist forces could offer revolutionary leadership to the international working class—a line they tried to impose anti-democratically, by expelling the majority of the French Trotskyist movement.

LO descends from a group led by Robert Barta that refused to join the Fourth International at its founding in 1938 by Leon Trotsky—based on the reactionary argument that the Fourth International was a petty-bourgeois organization, as any workers’ struggles had to be rooted in the national soil. Dissolved shortly after the end of World War II and reconstituted later in the 1950s by forces around the New Left and the future founders of the Socialist Party (PS), it at times claimed to be Trotskyist. But it never broke with a nationalist and petty-bourgeois orientation to the union bureaucracy.

Nearly 30 years after the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991, as the unions are strangling struggles against the police state built by the PS and Macron, these parties are patently bankrupt.

In 2002, they rejected the initiative proposed by the ICFI for an active boycott of the second round of the presidential election between right-winger Jacques Chirac and neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen, aiming to mobilise workers protesting against the election in a movement against the next president. Instead, the LO and the LCR (as the NPA was called at the time) fell in line with the media campaign for a Chirac vote, claiming that he would stop the neo-fascist Le Pen. Two decades later, the bourgeoisie is placing neo-fascist parties and militarism at the heart of official politics across Europe.

Not only is the far right now in power in 10 European countries, including Italy, but Macron—who posed as the best opponent of Marine Le Pen—has saluted the fascist dictator Philippe Pétain while violently repressing the “yellow vests.” The necessity of unifying workers’ struggles across Europe into a revolutionary struggle of the working class for power is

ever more urgent. In this context, the PES and the ICFI advance the Trotskyist perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe.

In this campaign, LO took over as a slogan the United Socialist States of Europe. This is a cynical dodge, however, because the political content that LO and the NPA try to give this demand is a defence of the existing capitalist EU—as shown by the accounts of the discussions between the two parties on their joint European election campaign.

In its article titled “European elections, NPA-LO talks: It’s hard,” the NPA reports that LO refused the NPA’s proposals to criticise the founding treaties of the EU. LO apparently objected to any notion of calling for a “break” with the EU—a point that the NPA agreed to, claiming this was necessary to fight nationalism. “Their strong argument,” the NPA wrote of LO, is that in a previous period “it was necessary to fight prejudices that the EU was progressive, but now we have to fight reactionary prejudices.”

But the lie that the EU fights nationalist prejudices is just as reactionary and false as the claim that nationalism is an alternative to the EU. As it lets refugees drown in the Mediterranean, supports the re-militarisation of German imperialism, works with Italy’s far-right government and hails the violent repression of social protest in France, the EU is clearly hatching violently reactionary nationalist tendencies across Europe. Having learned nothing from the disastrous failure of their 2002 strategy to halt the rise of the far right with calls for a Chirac vote, the LO and the NPA are now relying on the EU, falsely imagining that its reactionary organisation of European imperialism has “internationalist” virtues.

The only way forward in the struggle against militarism and neo-fascism is the independent, international mobilisation of the working class on a socialist programme. The exposure of these petty-bourgeois parties is of critical importance for workers struggles in Europe and beyond. It shows the absolute necessity for workers in struggle to organise in committees of action, independent of the old union bureaucracies. It also underscores the necessity to build the ICFI as the revolutionary leadership of the working class.

It is only through a fight for revolutionary perspective in the working class that it is possible to transfer political power to these organisations created by workers in struggle, at a not only national, but a continental, scale—that is, to build the United Socialist States of Europe.

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